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# *Students First*

## A Guide for Students

Preparing to Write  
the Social Studies 30  
Diploma Examination



# Preparing to Write the Social Studies 30 Diploma Exam

Dear Student:

The authors of this guide are staff from the Student Evaluation Branch. These are the people who actually put together the exam you will be writing. They also organize the marking sessions and train the teachers who mark the exams. These people see first-hand what thousands of students are doing right (and wrong) when they write an exam.

This guide and all other diploma exam-related materials produced by Student Evaluation Branch staff are identified with the logos



I hope you will find this guide helpful. Good luck on exam day!

Frank Horvath, Director  
Student Evaluation Branch

## Getting ready

### ✓Be there

The best way for you to prepare to write the Social Studies 30 Diploma Examination is to decide, as you begin the course, that you will attend class regularly, participate in classroom activities, complete your assignments, and learn what the course has to offer.

Sounds obvious—but lots of students try to find a short-cut to success. There isn't one.

Your class work is worth 50% of your final mark, but there is more to it than that. The skills that you practise and the knowledge that you master when you apply yourself to the best of your ability in class are the *same skills and knowledge* that you will need for success on the diploma examination.

Prepare yourself by *being there*.

### ✓Keep up to date

The goal of the Social Studies 30 program is to give you the knowledge and skills that will help you to become an informed citizen. The diploma exam reflects this goal.

So—since your short-term goal is to get a good mark in Social 30, you need to know that the course and exam demand far more than memorization and recognition of “facts.”

How do you achieve your goal (a good mark) and the course goal (informed citizenry)?

- Keep up to date on major world events—catch the news on radio and T.V. and read newspapers.
- Read both historical and current accounts that stimulate your imagination and make you think. Just as you can’t drive a car properly without using the rearview mirror, you can’t understand much about the present without knowing something about the past.
- Think about the relationships between past and present, politics and economics, social change and historical events, etc.
- Ask yourself and others questions about important issues.

The diploma examination, like the course, demands that you apply your knowledge and your critical thinking skills. You will be required to relate what you know to new information.

### ✓Gain confidence

Cramming for a diploma exam the night or week before will not help you to get a good mark, and it sure won’t do much for your confidence level. The knowledge you gain and the skills you develop as you *work through* the course are what will count at exam time. Plan to arrive at the exam with a lot of practice in:

- **thinking** about what you have learned and studied
- **making** connections between pieces of information
- **recognizing** and understanding similarities in actions, events, beliefs, values, assumptions
- **understanding** the assumptions, beliefs, values, philosophies, and issues that are behind actions, decisions, statements
- **recognizing** and understanding the complex relationships between political, social and economic systems
- **focusing**, supporting and communicating your ideas
- **translating** your thoughts and observations about issues into written and spoken words

This kind of knowledge and thinking practice will give you the most important test writing abilities—confidence and skill in focusing and communicating your ideas.



✓ **Review past exams**

Good practice for writing Parts A and B of the Social Studies 30 Diploma Examination is to review the most recent examinations. The format and question styles change over time. Do not use exams that are more than two to three years old. Past copies of the January and June exams should be on file in your school. You can purchase copies from Alberta Education's *Learning Resources Distributing Centre*, 12360-142 Street, Edmonton Alberta T5L 4X9, Phone: 403-427-2767. The price is \$2.00 for each exam.

✓ **Take advantage of the exam's design**

The Social Studies 30 Diploma Examination consists of 2 parts; Part A contains 70 multiple-choice questions worth one mark each and Part B contains a writing assignment worth 30 marks with a choice of 2 essay topics.

Before you begin the examination, check the two essay topics. **(Remember that you are to write on only one.)**

Why check? Your check on the essay topics will alert you to look for ideas in the multiple-choice questions and source material that might help with your essay. Remember, an exam does not just ask you *for* information, it also provides you *with* information.

As you work through the multiple-choice questions, you should be thinking about which of the essay topics you are best equipped to write.

✓ **Use your time wisely**

The diploma exam has been designed to be comfortably completed in 2 1/2 hours, but you can take up to three hours.

Don't rush through the examination. However, if you usually take a long time to write an exam, be sure to budget your time so that you complete everything required.

Tips for using your time wisely:

- **read the** material thoroughly
- **think** about what is asked of you before you respond
- **plan** your essay
- **select** information in the exam that can help you complete your essay
- **reread** and **revise your** finished writing (make neat corrections directly on your finished work)

## Advice for completing the multiple-choice questions

### ✓ Know what types of questions you will face

The multiple-choice questions on the diploma examination are carefully developed to assess your knowledge and thinking skills. There are also different types of multiple-choice questions. That is why it is important, as emphasized earlier, for you to review previous exams.

What sorts of questions are there?

### ✓ Understand Information

**Knowledge questions** test your understanding and recollection of such things as important events and people, economic concepts, and ideologies. For example,

*Use the following chart to answer question 1.*

Japan	→	1931	→	Manchuria
Italy	→	1936	→	Abyssinia
Germany	→	1938	→	?

1. The country that completes this chart is

- A. France
- B. Poland
- \*C. Austria
- D. Belgium

This question tests your ability to apply historical knowledge by completing a chart. This is an example of a question that asks you to select an answer that is the only possible choice—all other choices are wrong.



✓ **Apply what you know**

**Skill questions** test your ability to apply what you know in new situations or to think carefully and interpret information presented to you in various forms such as quotations, maps, graphs, or cartoons. For example,

*Use the following quotation to answer question 2.*

In Germany, they came first for the communists, and I did not speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak up because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up for me.

—Martin Niemöller

2. The intent of the author, in communicating these ideas, is to suggest that
- A. authoritarian regimes flourish in deeply divided democratic societies
  - B. authoritarian regimes primarily target ideological differences as the object of their oppression
  - \*C. dissent toward the policies of authoritarian regimes is ultimately an individual responsibility
  - D. dissent toward the policies of authoritarian regimes must be made swiftly and with violence

Question 2 is an example of a question that asks you to examine a source and apply the information it provides to answer the question. *You need to read and interpret the source carefully before you select the correct answer.*

✓ **Use your powers of judgement**

**Judgement** questions require you to evaluate alternatives. When answering these “best answer” questions, be sure to read all four alternatives (A, B, C, and D) carefully before choosing the answer that you think is **best**. Judgement questions include in their stems bold-faced qualifiers such as **best, most, mainly, or primarily**. Often, all the alternatives are correct to some degree, but one of them will be best because of the context established by the question. Here’s an example.

Use the following description to answer question 3.

- Many competing political parties have strong ideological beliefs, but the majority are committed to basic democratic freedoms.
- Broad consensus and cooperation among social classes is often lacking.
- The electoral system is based on proportional representation.
- Diverse cultural/ethnic groups are often reluctant to entrust their interests to major political parties.

3. This description is **most** typical of nations in

- A. Africa
- \*B. Europe
- C. South America
- D. North America

This question requires you to read four descriptors and determine a setting where **all** four apply. *Some of these features appear in nations in each of the four continents listed but in which continent do all four appear?* You need to recognize important ideas and concepts in the details of the descriptors. If you don't, you're in trouble—but let's assume, for example, that you understand what is meant by "proportional representation" as a start. Ask yourself, "Is proportional representation found in the nations of North America"? And so on.

✓ **Approach each question actively**

**Perhaps the most important advice we can give you is for you to read each multiple-choice question and any source material very carefully.** Obvious? Yes. But there is a big payoff.

Here are a few suggestions about "careful" reading. Choose those that work for you.

- Use a highlighter pen or pencil to circle key words and ideas. Cross out choices that you know are wrong. Jot down a brief summary of what you have read.
- Think carefully about what you are reading. For example, ask yourself what the quotation you have just read or the map you have just examined is *really* telling you. Ask yourself questions. What is important here? Is this writer biased?

In other words, think about any source material **before** you attempt the multiple-choice questions that follow. You'll be surprised how your initial thoughts often connect with the actual questions.



- Cover up the four choices when you read the questions, and see if you can identify the correct answer in your own mind. If, when you look at the four choices, a correct answer does not appear to you, try to eliminate those that seem most incorrect or unlikely; then use your judgement to choose an answer from the choices remaining.

By actively approaching each question, you may improve your chances of selecting the correct answer.

### ✓Take time to think

Take time to puzzle out tough questions. Don't panic if an answer does not present itself immediately. Work from partial knowledge when it is appropriate to do so. If a correct or best answer is not obvious to you, eliminate those answers that seem most wrong and then use your powers of judgement to select an answer from those that remain.

### ✓Organize your time

Organize your time so that you can **check your work**. You may find that you have overlooked a question or that you have gained information from the exam and now know the answer to a question you left out before.

Trust your instincts. You probably shouldn't change a lot of your original answers; often, your first response will be the best one.

### ✓Read the essay topics carefully

As we mentioned earlier, you should read the essay topics before you begin the multiple-choice questions. That way, you can be watching for relevant ideas and information for your essay as you go along.

When you are ready to start your essay, take time to read all the instructions and information provided. It's time well spent! This will help you focus on the task and on what is expected of you.

**Read the preamble and issue statement for each topic and then select the topic about which you are most knowledgeable, not the one you think is the easiest or hardest to complete.** (Your biggest problem may be selecting one topic because you could write on both!)

Here are two tips to help decide which topic to write on.

- List specific examples that you could use to support a position on your preferred topic.



- If you can't come up with a good list (your examples are few and/or very general, and your details are sketchy), consider choosing the other topic.

## ✓Plan your writing

Planning, as every teacher has told you, is probably one of the most important things you can do. And they're right. The essay you are about to write is a demanding exercise. If you simply plunge in, you could easily crash. The best writers take time to plan and organize their thoughts.

How do you plan and organize under exam conditions? Here are some suggestions.

- Don't feel that everyone has to use the same approach to planning. There are many ways to plan: take time during the year or semester to find out which method is best for you.
  - Do you think and write best from a complex point-form outline (introduction—main body—conclusion)?
  - Are you better off with comparison charts or concept webs?
  - Do key words provide you with what you need to write effectively?
  - Do you need to list examples and possible supporting evidence before you start to write?
  - Do you think and write best if you know how you will conclude before you begin the main part of your essay?
 Plan the way that is most effective for you, *but plan*.
- In your planning mode, ask yourself some important questions. Where do I stand on this issue? What is my thesis statement? Why is this issue important? Why is it complex? What is an important reason I can use to support my position? What's another reason? Are there some examples I can use to back up my reasons or arguments? Jot your ideas down.
- Although planning is important, don't overdo it. Make sure you leave enough time for the actual writing.

## ✓Organize and develop your writing

Remember that your reading audience is a teacher. Teachers like to see evidence of careful thinking in what they read. They don't like to be retold the whole story of the Second World War or the life history of Adam Smith. Therefore, you should write with a purpose.

- Have and develop a clear thesis statement on the issue. Some writers lead the reader to their position in their conclusion; others state their position at the start. There is no “best” approach, *but* a thesis that is clear, and to which *everything* else in the essay relates, is essential.
- Throughout your essay, show your understanding of the issue. Say why it is significant. Comment about why people have different points of view on the issue, and perhaps why it is not so easily resolvable. No issue is simple; that’s why they’re called issues.
- Argue your position in an orderly and logical fashion. State your main points and follow up each one with supporting evidence. Or, develop your points of argument from your specific examples. These are time-honoured methods of convincing a reader that your position is the “best” one. (If you did a good job of planning before you started, this should be relatively easy to do.)
- Establish a basis for each of your arguments or reasons. Is there an economic reason or an ethical reason, for example, that supports your position? Are there specific examples that you can use to support your arguments and reasons? Are there any experts or authorities whose ideas would support your position?
- Be sure that each sentence in your essay contributes to the development of your arguments and is related to your position on the issue.
- Use current events to develop and support your point of view, if applicable.

✓ **Be careful when  
using the information  
contained in the exam**

As we mentioned earlier in this guide, the information provided in the exam can help you to think about your essay and even provide a few additional ideas that you may not have had when you started—but be careful. Multiple-choice questions contain *wrong* as well as *right* answers. If you choose to use information provided in a wrong answer, it’s not going to turn out very well. Information contained in a source such as a quotation, cartoon, or graph might serve you better.

If you do choose to use information from the multiple-choice in your essay, remember that it is provided to help *stimulate* your response, *not to be your response*. Do not copy word for word information from the exam. The teacher who marks your essay is interested in *your* ideas and explanations.



**✓Take ownership of your writing**

The best essays are written by students who have “taken ownership” of their work. The more involved you are in your response, the more likely it is that you will produce a clear, consistent, well written and, most importantly, **convincing** argument.

*Concentrate on telling your readers what you really think and believe about this issue and why they should think and feel the same way you do. Your confidence counts and teacher markers will sense it.*

**✓Reread your work**

Your writing will be marked for not only what you say, but also for how clearly and correctly you say it. Be sure to take some time to reread your writing carefully. Ask yourself questions such as these as you check your work:

- Are my arguments consistent, or do they contradict one another?
- Did I support my arguments with thorough explanations and examples?
- Did I use historically correct examples that are relevant to my position?
- Is my writing organized and easy to follow?
- Did I use correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar?
- Did I use words correctly and accurately?
- Have I used specific information, words, and examples?
- Will my essay convince my reader that my position is the “best” one?

**✓Make corrections on your finished work**

If you think of changes that will improve your essay, make them. Don’t worry about crossing out a sentence, correcting a word, or adding another word. The markers understand the conditions you are writing under, and they expect to see corrections and revisions (as long as they can still make out what you have written).

**✓Use a pen for your finished work**

Use a blue or black pen, not a pencil. Essays completed in pencil are usually much more difficult to read than those completed in pen. You can help markers to concentrate on your ideas if your writing is easy to read.

**✓Stop worrying**

Remember that test anxiety can really hurt your ability to show what you have achieved and have learned. Relax and get your thoughts together. This is where planning helps to start things off. (And it will really help if you arrive well rested and fed! Fatigue and hunger do not help you to think calmly.)

## ***Additional Reminders***

### **✓Further information**

For more detailed information about the Social Studies 30 Diploma Examination, ask your teacher about a booklet from Alberta Education called the *Social Studies 30 Information Bulletin*. Each Social Studies 30 teacher will have a copy. This bulletin contains a great deal of information about the diploma examination as well as the scoring criteria used by markers to evaluate your written work.

Your teacher will also have a booklet showing samples of students' writing from past Social Studies 30 Diploma Examinations. Note that the model responses in the *Samples of Students' Writing* document have been provided *for instructional purposes only*. If you memorize sections from these responses and use them while writing Part B, you will be guilty of plagiarism and will be in breach of examination regulations.

### **✓Writing your exam on a wordprocessor**

If you normally do your written work on a wordprocessor, you may have an opportunity to use a word-processor for writing your diploma exam. Speak to your Social Studies 30 teacher about this. Every school now has copies of the Interim Policy: *Writing Diploma Examinations with Word Processors*.

### **✓Exam-writing materials**

You are responsible for providing your own writing materials—pens, HB pencils, highlighters, etc.

### **✓Rescores**

You may request a rescoring of your examination if you believe that the mark you have received is not appropriate. Before applying for a rescoring, be sure to check your Diploma Examination Results Statement. The multiple-choice mark is not likely to change, but your mark on the written response could change slightly. Remember that the mark, whether it increases or decreases, will be your final mark. There is a \$26.75 fee for this service of rescoring.

### **✓Other questions**

If you have questions about the exam that your teacher can't answer, or if you are a student without a regular classroom teacher, feel free to call

Mr. Barry Jonas, the Social Studies 30 Examination Manager  
or

Ms. Elana Scraba, Assistant Director, Humanities Diploma Exams  
at 403-427-0010.

To call toll-free from outside of Edmonton dial 310-0000.

***Good Luck!***

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